

Defining and Measuring Active Citizenship

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As we consider the link between service and civics, we must first agree on what are the qualities of an active citizen. To help us in this effort, we draw on two recent works that firmly illustrate the role that service and volunteering play in the broad construct of active citizenship.

In early 2003, Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland convened a group of scholars and practitioners who came to consensus on a definition of active citizenship. This group concluded that competent and responsible citizens ...

...Are informed and thoughtful. They have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; an ability to obtain information when needed; a capacity to think critically; and a willingness to enter into dialogue with others about different points of view and to understand diverse perspectives. They are tolerant of ambiguity and resist simplistic answers to complex questions.

...Participate in their communities. They belong to and contribute to groups in civil society that offer venues for Americans to participate in public service, work together to overcome problems, and pursue an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.

...Act politically. They have the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes – for instance, by organizing people to address social issues, solving problems in groups, speaking in public, petitioning and protesting to influence public policy, and voting.

...Have moral and civic virtues. They are concerned for the rights and welfare of others, are socially responsible, willing to listen to alternative perspectives, confident in their capacity to make a difference, and ready to contribute personally to civic and political action. They strike a reasonable balance between their own interests and the common good. They recognize the importance of and practice civic duties such as voting and respecting the rule of law. (1)

Scott Keeter, Associate Director of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, offers a list of nineteen indicators of engagement that are also useful to this discussion. Five of these indicators relate to participation in voting and electoral campaigns, nine are explicitly related to political action, and five are what he calls "civic indicators" that are inclusive of service and volunteering.

CORE Indicators of Engagement (2)

Civic Indicators

1. Community problem solving.
2. Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization.
3. Active membership in a group or association.
4. Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride.
5. Other fund raising for charity.

Electoral Indicators

6. Regular voting.
7. Persuading others.
8. Displaying buttons, signs, and stickers.
9. Campaign contributions.
10. Volunteering for candidate or political organizations.

Indicators of Political Voice

11. Contacting officials.
12. Contacting the print media.
13. Contacting the broadcast media.
14. Protesting.
15. E-mail petitions.
16. Written petitions.
17. Boycotting.
18. "Boycotting", that is, buying a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it.
19. Canvassing.

In both of these efforts to describe active citizenship, service and volunteering claim a clear and significant place.

1. Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, 2003, p. 10.
2. Keeter, S., Zukin, C., Andolina, M., & Jenkins, K., *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.



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